

Host

She heads a 35 members communication team in India. Yes, a 35 members team. It's probably the largest communications team in the country. Her company operates in one of the most happening businesses in the world. We have today, Minari Shah, Director Communications at Amazon India. She discusses with us what has changed for her and her team since COVID. The challenges, difficulties and learnings.

Hi, Minari, welcome to Mrigashira. So, I just get to the topic first, in terms of what has changed for you and Amazon during COVID times.

Minari

Thanks, Radha first of all for calling me for this one. So, this is my first podcast, in terms of what changed, you know, for us as a team and I think same thing, I think the first piece that's important is something which may not be unique to PR, or Amazon or the teams, I think it's all of us are really missing the human interaction. I don't think we ever realized how much we cared about going into work and offices. And, you know, those coffees and those breaks, how much work done and how much it mattered for us and our productivity. So, I think that's something that we all missing. I think our jobs of communication are such that I think both in terms of how we gather business inputs, as well as how we deliver them to our audiences, depend also a lot on different kinds of larger or small meetings, one on ones, interviews, meetings, and all of this. So, I think all of these have changed, right? How do we gather inputs? How do you communicate it? How do you meet your audiences meet, the media meet, employees, whoever these are, you know, the fact that you can't own ground events, I think is a huge one for a company like Amazon, we do a lot of outreach of different kinds. I think these are some of the really big changes of what's really changed. And then I think the other piece, which is perhaps again, common to everyone, is I think we're all putting in longer hours, I think boundary between work and personal life, seems to be seems to have kind of gone away. People who said they used to shut down at six are not finding it easy. And they say that they're working till 10 o'clock. So, I think it's needing a lot more conscious effort to find those right boundaries. I think all of those I think are the big ones. I think everyone's is drained being on calls all the time, you need a lot more energy to do the same meetings on a on some kind of video or audio call.

Host

I completely agree on that. In fact, that brings me to the next question. So, it must be a bit of a challenge for you to keep the team motivation high, getting them all together, and you know, still go with the same kind of drive that one would have done when they are face to face.

Minari

So, I think there are multiple things that have happened in the last few months. First of all, the business challenges that came in here we are a company that our customers are depending on a lot more, more than ever, because they felt that it would be safe for them to shop online.

Host Okay,

Minari

We had a lot of our selling partners, our sellers, who are depending on us more than ever, because this was the one way to keep their business going. When they could not keep their offline business good. This was the one way to keep their work and their income going. So, we had a lot of our

customers and sellers depending on us more than ever, and yet there were all these different kinds of challenges that we had to solve, while all of us working remotely. So, we had a lot of the policy kind of issues, you know, getting curfew passes for 10s of 1000s of people across the country. My geography knowledge improved. I learned they were more than 713 districts because we had to work literally with each district. What laws of the country means and what locked down? We had to deal with being more flexible than ever, containment zones because there was a red, green and yellow zones, the containment zones, one day, you could deliver in an area, next day you could not so you, taking order, suddenly you can't, suddenly, something changes, you know. So, there was a lot of dealing with all of that. We were dealing with a lot of tech teams, and legal teams and PR teams and business teams who are based in different parts, not just of India, but in US. So, you know, we were working at strange hours trying to solve all of these different pieces, get the transport organized for our people who did need to be in our warehouses, our FC's fulfilment centers, people who needed to deliver products, people building the supply chain. So I think those were the kinds of challenges. And it took a couple of weeks, I think we were building it as we went, you know, signing up with local shops to be able to bring in the pipeline, and so on. So, I think a lot of was, you know, kind of innovating and learning at that point in time. And that really, I think that your question, why do I bring this up? When you say, how do you get the team to be driving easily? I think the first couple of months, it was the sheer compulsion of the fact that, you know, you can make a difference, that as a company, you're actually really responsible for so many lives, and made such a difference is what really added a lot of purpose. I think teams were driven by that purpose. I think it's only in the second half of the, how do I say, the lock downs and all of it, that some of that started changing? And then we started looking at, you, I think, initially, it was that, okay, there are these few months, and we need to face all of these, then you realize that this is not going away, that this is going to be there for a long time to come? And how do you really keep the team morale high? I think first part of it was really getting the right infrastructure, making sure people had the right chairs and desks and workstations. You know, initially, it was just about making sure everyone has laptops, right. And that's true in a company like, everyone already had it. That wasn't, you know, there were people who needed the right dongles and connectivity. But after point, when it became extended, people need it right kind of chairs, people needed right kind of working stations, there were people who were getting furniture done. So, making sure that as a company, we could support all of that, you know, where we could get the office furniture to them with it. But otherwise, just making sure that people could charge it to the company, making sure that the hours became a lot more flexible. You know, when people are working longer hours, we could not stick to the normal kind of work hours, we were also working difficult hours because managing the US teams, etc. So a lot more flexibility. People said that they needed time out to cook and clean houses and manage kids online schooling. So, you know, making sure that people were able to do those. I mean, I know that there are times I just lock calendars to say I'm cooking. You know, we had no helps at home. And so, people needed a lot more flexibility to make sure that they were able to do whatever they needed to do for you. So, making sure that we were respectful of that, you know, flexibility. We, these whole calls get draining. We have now started that once a week we have a no meeting day. We actually did a call where we online invited a Taj bartender to show us how to make cocktails, and sort of it's funny because you're doing this both for India teams, but sometimes you're also doing this with regional teams. So there was one time because my colleagues are in Australia, Japan, Singapore. So, I'm the last one. So, I was doing it at four o'clock, I was having a gin cocktails. I said, Okay. So, I think it's just learning how to live with all of it.

Host

We are taking a short break; we'll be back with a conversation with Minari Shah in a little while.

Welcome back to Mrigashira, a podcast that communicates with communicators. We are in conversation with Minari Shah, Director, Communications at Amazon, India.

Does it also mean that the ecosystem within Amazon has also develop more empathy towards what you guys go through day in and day out, because this is not a one-day affair. I mean, this has been happening for months together for you guys.

Minari

I think right from the start from the very beginning, there was a lot of recognition that this was actually harder than anything that we know, that work from home, and working remote, and all these challenges that we just discussed, long working hours and boundaries blurring and all that made it hard. And I think right from the start, all the leaders were super empathetic about that, from the beginning, there was a recognition that we needed to understand and help our teams and our colleagues and our people managed this better. I think you cannot do this without that empathy. Now, whether it's making sure that your backs are okay, by the right chairs and tables, and, you know, you don't have to worry about connectivity, there will be calls that people will not join on video, you're joining it weird hours of the day and night. You know, being respectful of people's time, and recognizing that people need to prioritize personal time as well. I think absolutely I think empathy is absolutely to do that.

Host

Okay. It comes it brings me to one last question, which is that, what is the kind of learning that you have had, and something that sums up your entire experience?

Minari

You know, we went to Prime Day very recently, yes. Prime Day for Amazon is this event at scale, which Prime members look forward to which, you know, hundreds of, 1000 of sellers look forward to and when we started, we said, how do we really find it in these conditions with the level of ambiguity there is, and we did it and, you know, it was the biggest day for the SMBs we've ever had in seven years in India, customers really had a demand. Yeah, we had more SMBs you know, selling than ever, more SMB products and all of that. So, it is bigger than ever. Customers clearly had needs, which they needed to fulfil. But to me, you know, what that epitomised? That been called upon the two things which I took away? when called upon to do something human mind when pushed, will innovate and find a way out? I think we kept looking from building the pipeline, dealing with ambiguity of can be delivered. It's a Prime Day, there is a commitment we making, the customers have very high expectations from an Amazon promise. How do you deliver in era of containment zones and all of it, there is a huge our biggest priority is to keep our employees safe? So, you know, so people who are delivering, people who are at FC's, you have to make sure that their safety is paramount, while dealing with all of that people innovated and do it. So that was my one big learning that one can innovate and find a way. But, you know, the day the Prime Day was to start, it starts at midnight. And typically, we're all in office that night, and everyone there is this intense excitement and adrenaline. And you're all, you know, gathered not just your team's, business teams, and everyone leaders and everyone, and you've watched it as it goes live and, and everything went fine. But all of us were like, oh my god, I can't believe I'm not in office. It was that human touch that human interaction of just being together, watching each other be tensed, and smile and relief that we missed. So, my takeaways you can do whatever needs to be done, one can keep finding the way out because it's important to do. There were people depending on us. But finally miss people and we're all I think waiting to go back to be able to spend time with each other.

Host

Hope that happens soon Minari, because it is something that all of us are going through and hopefully, we all go back and, you know, meet our colleagues and spend great time with them. Thanks for coming on show. And it was great chatting with you and look forward to having you on board many times over as we progress along.

Minari

Thanks, Radha. It was great chatting. Thank you.